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Press Release

High level meeting of African Ambassadors of main countries of origin of African migrants in the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)



Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 29 October, 2019

- African Experts drawn from major countries of origin of migrant workers in the Middle East and the Gulf Cooperating Countries met to share experiences on international labour migration cooperation mechanisms aimed at improving labour migration governance and explore avenues for policy dialogue with Middle East Countries. This meeting responds to the recommendations by stakeholders in labour migration governance in Africa, for a multilateral process, for enhanced

protection of teeming number of migrant workers of African descent in the Middle East.

The engagement of the African Union Commission with the diaspora in the Gulf started in 2016 with a desk study that maps the African diaspora living in the gulf and understands the modes and waves of migration. Since then, two field visits have been carried out to United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

Available data show that the Middle East region is the second largest region of destination for African migrant workers due to cultural, religious and historic factors. An increasing number of African Member States have negotiated bilateral labour agreements with Middle East countries, including Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, mainly for the supply of domestic workers. Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, South Africa and Uganda account for top African migrant workers in the Middle East.

Remittances from the Middle East continue to increase, with United Arab Emirates accounting for the second highest remittance sending country in 2017, followed by Saudi Arabia (World bank, 2017). In 2018, Egypt and Nigeria were the top receiving remittance countries in Africa, with a total of USD 28.9 million and USD 24.3 million respectively.

In spite of this, labour migration governance in the Middle East and GCC region is in dire need of policy and structural reforms in various areas including training and ethical recruitment, decent jobs, skills recognition, legal and consular services as well as protection of human rights in line with international standards. Qatar for instance, has announced its landmark labour reforms in the Kafala system¹, as labour migrants will be free to change jobs, do not require exit permits and are no longer subject to discriminatory minimum wage by 2020.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_724052/lang--en/index.htm

Unlike Asian countries, Africa does not have any labour migration multilateral cooperation agreement with the Middle East, hence there are gaps in the protection of African migrant workers and their families. To address this, Sri Lanka as the previous Chair of the Colombo process was invited to the meeting to share its experiences in managing Asian labour migrant workers. In his words, H.E. Ambassador Mr. Sumith Dassanayake stated that *“As the previous chair of the Colombo process, Sri Lanka is delighted to share its experiences on managing labour migration from Sri Lanka to the Middle East and GCC region noting that migration is a global phenomenon with opportunities for both countries of origin and destination as well as migrants themselves”*.

The multilateral framework on labour migration management will be a State-led dialogue process to address issues of common interest between Africa and Middle East, mainly bothering protection of labour migrants, provision of decent jobs, fair and non-discriminatory wages as well as ensuring ethical practices in recruitment and employment.

On behalf of the ILO, Ms. Silvia Cormaci, the Manager for the Priority Actions of the AU-ILO-IOM-ECA Joint Programme on Labour Migration Governance for Development and Integration in Africa said that, *“Current estimates, place the number of African migrants to the Middle East & GCC at three million. There is a need to identify solutions to the identified common challenges and enhance cooperation mechanisms between the key countries of origin and destination for migrant workers. Joint voice by many countries have greater impact than the lone voice of a single country. The ILO remains committed to support the process of engagement and the overall implementation of the AU-ILO-IOM-ECA Joint Programme on Labour Migration Governance for Development and Integration in Africa (JLMP Priority).*

Also speaking during the meeting, the International Organization for Migration shared its experiences in establishing Inter State Consultation Mechanisms on Migration (ISCMs). The Chief of Mission, Ms. Maureen Achieng noted that *“Though it is not as widely publicized in the media as migration to Europe, the GCC is increasingly a major destination of African migrants leaving the continent. The trends and more recent data show that the Middle East is the second largest region of destination for African migrant workers. Beyond existing bilateral agreements, a more integrated approach, in particular an inter-regional mechanism, is needed for African governments to engage the Middle East Countries to explore regular migration mechanisms, protection of migrant workers and their families and dignified return and reintegration for migrants who decide to go back to their home countries..”*

Making her remarks, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs for Ethiopia, Dr. Ergogie Tesfaye stated that *“As primary duty bearers to ensure the protection of the rights of migrant workers, the onus is on us, governments, to take the leadership and ownership of the processes of engagement with key receiving countries for our labour migrants. We have a critical role to ensure that we are well informed of the pre-existing information-sharing and policy dialogue forums at the regional, inter-regional or global level.”*

On behalf of the Commissioner for Social Affairs, the Director, Ms. Mariama Cisse stated the need for African to learn from existing multilateral processes like the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue which has helped in improving the situation of Asian migrant workers in the Gulf countries. In her words *“ Gulf States are willing to engage the African region for a common interest and the Commission is ready to provide all necessary cooperation to make this a success”*. She noted that the outcomes of the discussions will be presented during the Africa-Middle East Dialogue which will be held in February, 2020.

In his remarks, H.E. Mr. Fafre Camara, the Ambassador of Mali and Chair of the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) on Multilateral Cooperation said, *“Migration is an opportunity and a development and cohesion. We need to see the different opportunities offered by migration and*

collectively address the multitude of issues that our migrant workers face within and beyond the continent”

The meeting was organized within the auspices of the AU-ILO-IOM-ECA Joint Labour Migration Governance Programme for Regional Development and Integration in Africa, better known as the JLMP. The programme was adopted in January 2015 by Heads of States with the aim to contribute to improved labour migration governance to achieve safe, orderly and regular migration in Africa.

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